

West Shore Chorale to celebrate 50 years with a world premiere by Dave Malloy

by Jarrett Hoffman



For the West Shore Chorale, composer [Dave Malloy](#) is more than just a multiple Tony Award nominee — most recently for his electro-pop opera *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*. He’s also a former member of the Chorale and a graduate of Lakewood High School, where his choir director was none other than West Shore’s conductor John Drotleff. The cherry on top? Malloy’s dad now sings in the choir — Drotleff heard him singing karaoke, and said he should try out.

Add all of that together, and it’s hard to imagine a better recipe for the Chorale’s 50th Anniversary Concert than Dave Malloy’s homecoming — and the world premiere of his *Dewdrops (A Requiem)* under the direction of his former teacher this Sunday, April 29 at 7:30 pm at Magnificat Performing Arts Center in Rocky River.

Dewdrops was commissioned by the Chorale as a companion piece to Mozart’s *Requiem*. The two works will sit side by side on Sunday’s program, titled “From Mozart to Malloy,” which will feature the West Shore Chorale Orchestra and student singers from West Side high schools.

“It’s really special and amazing to come back now,” Malloy said in a recent phone call. I began by asking about his studies at LHS, and he said, “I sang in as many things as I could. I was in all the big symphonic mixed choirs and the chamber choir, as well as a barbershop quartet for my senior year, which John also led.” Malloy described Drotleff and another choir director, Gerald Wondrak, as his two main musical mentors. “With the education I got from those two, I feel like they are the reason I am a composer today.”

The twist of fate that brought Malloy's dad into the group was a West Shore Chorale fundraiser in the early '90s that included a karaoke machine. "My dad got up and sang *Blueberry Hill*," Malloy recounted. "John heard him and said, 'Oh, you should come try out for the Chorale.'" Dave Malloy's father was previously a saxophone player. "He had to sell his horn to get his way through college, so he had been away from music for a long time. The choir was such a great way for him to get music back into his life, and he has tons of friends in it now."

Some of the Ohio University graduate's favorite pieces of choral music are the Mozart, Duruflé, and Fauré Requiems — all of which he sang under John Drotleff. But after studying the Mass text, he found that he didn't feel a close relationship to it. "For whatever reasons, my spiritual upbringing has led me to very different beliefs about death than the Latin text conveys," he said. "So I started exploring other traditions around death and texts I might play with, and eventually found my way to these Japanese [death poems](#). There was something about them that seemed to sing to me a little better about what I might feel about death."

The end result is a combination of a number of texts: "A little bit of the Latin mass and some of these Japanese death poems, pretty freely mashed together, and then some original text that I wrote, as well," the composer said.

Malloy's compositions have drawn on several styles and genres, but he described *Dewdrops* as "quite traditional" compared to what he usually composes. "As I was writing the piece, I was going back to those beautiful requiem masses that I love so much. I think in the commission, I had allowance to employ electronic sounds, or I could have the choir playing percussion if I wanted," he said, laughing. "But I ended up not doing any of that. There are a couple of glissandi in there — I think that's as wild as it gets."

In closing, I asked Malloy to compare composing for choir and Broadway. "When you're writing for musical theater, you're writing for characters who are in these narrative-driven situations," he said. "Choral music was actually very freeing in some ways. I felt like I could embrace pure poetry — I didn't have to think about what these people want, their motivations. I could really just savor the language."

West Shore Chorale will host a free Q&A with Dave Malloy on Saturday, April 28 at Noon at the Magnificat Performing Arts Center.

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